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AGAIN-WALKER

Draugr. Two days before my great-uncle's funeral, I wake up with this word in front of my eyes. *Draugr*. I know this word, but I don't know how to pronounce it. If the pronunciation is similar to Swedish, the "g" is barely spoken, and the "r" sounds are hard, flat flicks of the tongue on the mouth-roof. If you say it loudly and extend the first syllable into a howl, you sound like a cat in heat. I imagine people did this, howled its name, maybe around a fire or standing on a shore at some point. It is hard to say the word and not imagine something tribal and animal and old.

No one burned my great-uncle. Really, that's it. That's everything.

I live two hours south of my northern Minnesota hometown where my great-uncle lived with his sisters, and I drive up for the funeral. For years, I've tried to figure out where the line is, the one that divides two very distinct cultures. It's somewhere around Willow River, when anything metropolitan disappears and icy air blows from Lake Superior into the driver's-side window. The roads are nothing but pick-up trucks trailing four-wheelers and fishing boats, and I watch the woods on each side of the freeway for leaping deer. And then I'm home, this small town on the tip of the lake.

I hate this town, and I love it. When my great-aunts and great-uncle were alive, it was easy to drive past their apartment complex off the highway and see it the way they'd seen it for the past eighty years. If you can't see it like that—clusters of Swedish immigrants living together, taking the train to the mines and mills every morning, their kids sledding in the streets—all you can see sometimes are kids on amphetamines eating bags of chips outside the corner gas station.

The highway halves the town into a lower dip holding businesses, churches, restaurants, and a Walmart next to a high forested place cupping the grocery store and the Indian reservation. Rush-hour traffic only really occurs on a Friday during the summer, when people from the city two hours south stream through the town on their way to a campsite or a lake filled with fish up north. People traveling south keep moving down the highway until they reach the casino or even smaller towns with bars where you can sleep in your

car and resume drinking in the morning with friends you met in high school thirty years ago. Trucks feature bumper stickers advocating Republican candidates, conservative causes, outlines of naked women, Calvin pissing. But here's the damn beautiful thing, one of those stopgaps that keeps you from hating everything, at least if you're paying attention and have a little bit of home still bungeeing your heart back two hours north from where you live. On the highway in this small town, I have seen, on a Sunday evening, people braking softly to look at a rainbow in the southern sky.

My great-aunts lived in an apartment by the hardware store before they died, and I loved them more than anything. I loved them because they weren't crazy about girls getting married, and they had root beer and herring and sylta and doughy cookies at Christmas, and they were absolutely the most Swedish people you'd ever meet. When my family visited them, my great-uncle Ernie sat with us and ate cookies, flirted with me and my sister, and talked incessantly, although he couldn't hear a thing. He had a hearing aid that he had stepped on or sat on or that just didn't work. So he told stories, oblivious to interruption, stories about the importance of remembering the Vikings marauding through our blood, about Sweden single-handedly winning World War II, about his suspension from a one-room schoolhouse for failing to learn English. And every time he raised his mug of coffee to his lips, he would flinch, pull it away, yell the Norse toast "*Skål!*" and clink rims with everyone around the table.

Uncle Ernie, as I knew him, was tall even into his nineties. He looked like my father, although my father will deny this. He was bald and sometimes put powder on his head out of vanity, and when he forgot to rub it in, he denied having used it and wondered aloud where it might have come from. He wore glasses, the kind whose frames looked like beer-bottle glass in the sunlight. He had thick, strong teeth. He credited vodka and beer for pickling his body into near immortality. He wore suspenders and tweed trousers.

So that was how I knew my great-uncle. He was a yelling, laughing man who had to be around as many people as possible every hour of his life. But that's okay. I'm going to the funeral for my father, because my father knew his uncle when Ernie could hear and drive and remember his life. Besides, if all you did with a person was drink root beer together and listen to him, that's a pretty decent way to know someone, even if you just kept your mouth shut to avoid the effort of being heard.

I dreamed about Valhalla the night before Ernie died. Except it wasn't Valhalla. It was the other place: Folkvangr. The Viking garden of souls. My great-uncle wasn't there at the time. He was suffering in his bed or his great comfy chair, or he was on too much drowsy medication to realize he was suffering. Freya was there in Folkvangr, the goddess Freya, ready to dispense love and sex and fertility and wisdom. Folkvangr is her garden, and she looked exactly as she does in the old drawings—red hair and two adoring black cats and that huge necklace. She had to sleep with four dwarves to get that necklace, and I've always wondered about the moral of that story. She didn't really seem to mind. Brisingamen. That's the name of the necklace. Norse gods always named their possessions.

At the visitation, my father chews gum, awkwardly holds the card he'd brought in case there was a basket, and fumes. He fumes because he knows none of Ernie's wife's family, and he is the only Swede looking down at least a foot at everyone who stops by to ask who he is. All of these people are so nice, friendly in their grief, and my father, my sister, and I want to scream at everyone there. Because of Valhalla. Or the other place. But for now, let's pretend Uncle Ernie was a warrior clad in furs and brass and horns, drinking out of the skull of an Anglo-Saxon prince, and let's say Valhalla makes sense.

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I shower at my sister's house the morning before the funeral. I love her bathroom. It's one of those northwoods décor types of rooms that she never redecorated after buying the house from an elderly schoolteacher. Painted apples circle the kitchen, and stenciled brown bears lumber around the bathroom. More brown bears chewing on salmon traipse across the shower curtain. These bears make me feel like a safe little girl, because what from the outside could hope to touch a room so lost in its weird woodsy self?

But in the shower, I find a lump in my left breast, something that makes me suddenly cold under the hot force of the water as my heart tries to retrieve the scared blood suddenly pooling in my legs. I'm pretty sure it's just a cyst, but it's larger than any cyst I've felt, and it wasn't there a couple of weeks ago. I try to breathe, but my stomach is tight, and the waves of panic I am forcing down into it make it ache. I think, it's nothing, it's nothing, today is about your great-uncle's funeral.

I research the symptoms of breast cancer on my phone when I'm out of the shower. It's definitely a cyst, I think. But I keep running to the bathroom to

feel it again, make sure it's there, make sure it's as big as I thought. Definitely a cyst, totally normal. If I can continue to touch it, maybe it will stop scaring me. Maybe it will just be another part of my body by the end of the week.

I wanted to be Freya at the funeral, this tall, angry Scandinavian goddess in a room full of weepy people set on burying a Viking. But I can't be Freya with a lump in my breast and my eyes big and wet with the fear of it. Freya wore a breastplate and was stacked like any proper fertility goddess. I'm pretty stacked too, but now I have this little piece of either hormonal imbalance or certain death swimming in the flesh near my ribcage. I didn't actually want to be immortal, but I also didn't want anything so messy.

During Uncle Ernie's funeral, my sister is the only one acting appropriately. I am angry, partly at the funeral and the way it's being handled but mostly because I do this funny half-crying, half-giggling thing at funerals that paints me as a hysterical loose cannon. I am still thinking of the lump in my breast, wanting to focus on the funeral, but I'm overwhelmed by the panic of the morning and the reminders of death in this strange funeral parlor room that smells of wet ham from the buffet laid out behind our chairs. I am worried that I am only thirty, and my body is reminding me that it is mortal and changeable. I stare at my Ernie's body in the casket, knowing I can never be as strong, as sturdy, as Swedish, as the ancestors.

My father is immature, behaving like a seething child. I try to take a seat, and he pushes me into the center of the row, growling, "The man always sits on the outside to protect the women." I glare at him, wondering what we need protection from, and hoping that he knows, as I do, the ancient belief about Viking bodies being possessed by evil spirits and becoming "again-walkers" if anyone is so foolish as to bury them, rather than set their bodies alight and push them onto the open sea. *Draugrs*, they are called, those spirits. I want to say it under my breath at this Lutheran funeral. I want to believe that my father knows about the *Draugrs*, because it is the only way I can keep from punching him hard in the arm.

I think about those *Draugrs*. I don't even know what a *Draugr* properly is. I just know it's what happens when you don't do things correctly, when you forget what you are and follow a custom that has nothing to do with letting the body of your loved one rot and burn and voyage in peace. Or whatever Vikings liked in the afterlife if it wasn't peace. Girls and aquavit and stories is my guess, which sounds exactly like my Ernie's heaven. If these people

with their caskets and pastors and a week's worth of embalming fluid put a roadblock in his path to heaven, well, that's a good way to make a *Draugr*. This is all made up. But somehow, in the middle of this loss, my blood knows this like a story I've heard all my life, and I'm not sure which parts of the stories are myth anymore.

My father loves the Vikings. Not very many people think too much about the Vikings. He even likes the football team, which says a lot, because it's hard to like the Minnesota Vikings unless they're winning.

When I was a kid, he gave me a copy of *Beowulf*, and later, he let me read the Edda. Even the darkest, most violent of fairy tales have nothing on Norse legends. Blood and blood and blood, all of it. My father hates when I talk like this. He says the Vikings weren't all about violence, and he actually sounds pained when he claims they were poets and artists. But have you read any of those poems? They had more ways to describe the routes and trajectories blood can take out of the body than a vascular surgeon. I like poems about battles and ravens eating warriors and goddesses gang-banging dwarves for jewelry as much as anyone, but if I were a poet and that were the depth of my repertoire, you'd just about have my number as a violent sort of person.

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The Edda, a collection of the old Viking myths, was written by Snorri Sturlison under commission of the king of Norway (who later had him killed). Many of the stories are about Freya, because she travels between worlds, housing the souls of the dead in Folkvangr and getting the other gods out of trouble in Asgard. The Edda contains legends of famous battles between gods and demons, sibling rivalries that eventually turned to betrayal and bloodshed, and instructions on how to live a warrior's life with honor. But because they are gods, only honor, rather than life, is really ever at stake.

The Norse human world is not so neat. Everyone's fighting, and the most famous epic of the Viking era, *Beowulf*, espouses the beliefs of the time. Make too much noise, have too much fun, and a monster will descend and tear you into pieces. And, when you think of this world, this Viking world, do you ever see the sun? You don't. No one does. It's dark all the time, it's snowing, and the North Sea is icy.

These violent stories show a funny little obsession with death, born of living in a dark, cold place by the Arctic Circle. They reflect a need to be closer to death, rid it of hygiene, take it into the body and the poetry; to stab a virgin six times and throw her onto the boat containing your loved one's

body, light flesh on fire and send it to the ocean; to worry fiercely about what happens if you don't serve death exactly right, wonder what lurks beyond the funny myths, wonder about the underworld, the many worlds, the blood in the permafrost.

There are many worlds beyond Valhalla, beyond Folkvangr, along the road, the Norse rainbow called the *bifrost*, that connects all worlds. There are things here you cannot imagine, for all your kennings, your poems, your dainty sipping from the skulls of your enemies. You can get closer, you can kill, you can bury your face in a bowl of reindeer blood, you can write stories, you can try to do everything just right. You can pretend not to believe in ghosts. You can pretend you have served the world of the living and the dead exactly as you were instructed. You can pretend the old ways have been lost.

I should be really clear. I don't actually think my great-uncle's body should have been lit on fire and pushed into a body of water. That would have been ridiculously awful. It's just the idea of it, the thought that we might be strong enough to do it, the hope that a bit of those cold, honorable people lives in our blood, that we are not just small-town people going to work and church and the grocery store.

After the funeral, my sister and I bring a rotisserie chicken, baked beans, and coleslaw to my parents' house for lunch. On our way out of the grocery store, my sister grabs a large bucket of pickled herring from the deli. Northern Minnesota is most likely the only place you can buy fat pieces of salty herring by the bucket. She says we should eat it for Ernie, and we will, on salty crackers, piece after piece, the smell of fish and vinegar saturating our fingertips, my father not even complaining that it is only for Christmas.

We will sit in the sun of the living room, our plates of chicken and slippery fish balanced on our knees, and we will slurp coffee and silently think *Skål* each time the mug approaches our lips. I know we all do this, and I know it would be sentimental and cloying if we did it aloud. But everyone here is thinking it, toasting it, the Viking ghost of that defeated bowl of skull cupped in our hands, a violent transubstantiation, before the coffee spreads bitter fingers down our throats.

I drive home after lunch, two hours on the freeway, the first hour of which I think of as passage through the enchanted forest. The second hour is all fields, tornado warnings, stores selling outdoor survival equipment, blank

treeless space, and low pink clouds. Then the city, the naked city whose heritage is tied up in the preserved houses of lumber barons, twisted streets, vast domed churches, plaques, festivals. Even the ghosts are out in the open, celebrated, on display for haunted tours on Halloween. Plaques memorialize their lives, or maybe it's just where I live, right off Summit Avenue in Saint Paul. Robber baron paradise, and robber barons must have made all the history.

There aren't any plaques in my hometown. The plaques in northern Minnesota are east, along the curve of the state's arrowhead, all up Highway 23. They're not for ghosts, though; they're for geological formations, grinding pieces of hemorrhaging volcanic rock that pushed its teeth into the state's lakeside corner. What you put up to mark a spot of earth says something about what's important in your past, a man who formed part of your city, a movement under the earth that ruptured your land eons ago.

Those northern people with their forests and quiet highways, their past goes back further than the easily defined past of the city. Some people might feel mortal and inconsequential and small thinking of the space they occupy next to those cliffs from millions, billions of years ago. But I don't, and that whole "I feel so small" business might just be something someone said once, after which people repeated it to sound humble around nature. There is something comforting and safe about these reminders of eons ago, about the fact that ancient pieces of movement and rupture still exist tangibly in the world, that you have to put your car into second gear to avoid driving off the curves of the Paleolithic's stony remains. There is nothing small or humbling at all about living in a world that heaps a crushing load of the past on each new generation's back.

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The lump in my breast grows smaller over the next two weeks but doesn't go away. When I occasionally forget about it, I almost miss worrying about it. It's funny. When you spend so much time anxious about a piece of your body, it becomes a home to which you come, a reliable piece of flesh whose dimensions and consistency are your own intimate knowledge. This is how people fall in love with themselves, through the fearful new geographies, the ones they map like they can't stop thinking about how they don't belong, until one day, your fingertips tell you that that collection of cells and fluid belongs more than anything else. It is a sick, astonishing belonging, the way we can learn to adore anything that takes up residence inside of us.

The word *Draugr* does not go away. In the morning, it sits in front of me like a puppy, waiting for me to open my eyes. This is ridiculous.

I sit in the bath with a bottle of Guinness on the floor, letting the lavender-scented water relax my muscles, calm my heartbeat, reach up behind my eyes and close them. Sometimes when I need to have a conversation with my body, a bath is the best way to put both sides at ease. When we're all naked and relaxed, it's easier to be honest, to let things we'd never say otherwise rise to the surface with the glut of warmed capillary blood. I've done this before with injuries, touched my lips to the back of my ruptured calf muscle, folded my hands over my chest to let a dislocated rib know it was being protected.

I think of the lump in my tissue that appeared the morning of the funeral, the new piece of myself that could be illness. I wonder if this is what illness is, the remainder of grief and loss pulled into the body when something physical has deserted the earth. In the morning, I will make an appointment to have the lump checked, but for now, I hold onto it like it like grief made physical, this new occupation of flesh.

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Sometimes in the myths, Freya's necklace, Brisingamen, is reputed to have protective powers. This is often mentioned as a side note, almost apologetically, as if Freya needs more of a reason to have obtained it the way she did. I place my hands over my breasts, trying to add weight, comfort, to hold myself still for a moment, thinking how futile it is to tell dense, uncaring tissue how to behave by spreading my small fingers across the ribs. I imagine my fingers as her necklace, something ancient and powerful and heavy as hell, sinking deep through the muscle, commanding it to listen. I imagine my heart getting weary of the command, trying to communicate a breed of distress and change to a body and a mind that doesn't understand its language. So it pounds and trips and races. Its language is harder, faster, defining its own rebellious rhythm, roiling a sea of turbulent blood. Don't tell me I don't have a Viking heart.

And because I am warm and sleepy and perhaps a little drunk, I entertain the idea of a *Draugr* taking residence in my body. I decide to ask it what it wants. For all my reading of the Edda, I am pretty ignorant about how to communicate with an again-walker. I know the rules, vaguely. *Draugrs* are large when they choose to be visible, they can move through earth and walls, they possess the bodies of the living, and they frequently drive people insane

or tear them to pieces. So, given this information, I feel like communication can wait and acknowledgement is enough.

So I call its name. I have an odd idea that calling it, acknowledging something I don't even believe to exist, will help ease this warped space that has wrapped itself around my body. I want a cry from hundreds of years ago to help me find what has been lost, to fight the fear that has taken up residence throughout my tissue. I howl it, not aloud really, but whispered, opening my throat and widening my ribs over the press of my tightened diaphragm until the water grows cool.

I'm not crazy. It's just the idea, you know, that a whole world hasn't been lost with the death of a ninety-nine-year-old man.

I look up the pronunciation of the word *Draugr* and find very little information. I find that it's not a howl, as I'd thought. It's ancient, Norse, letters not making the sounds you'd expect. What the hell was I calling to in the bath last night? It's more like "Drogg," the "r" at the end silent or maybe just forming a lasting growl under the breath. Not a howl. No pain, no keening, no call and response. The word is a grunt, a sound pushed out of the solar plexus, as oars are driven into water. A battle cry from a wide-open jaw. A way of screaming a name as you barrel into the sea, your monster somewhere below you.

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In bed, I lie on my back for a while, pushing the lump against my fingers and trying to reassure myself before I sleep that it's nothing. I will call the doctor in the morning. I will do the right and proper thing rather than calling to a monster in the bath. I turn on the light and grab the Edda, which has been sitting on the floor by my bed since Ernie's death. I read the parts about Freya and Thor, wanting a bedtime story about violence and slaying and more blood than can possibly be held in the human body and dying a good death. But there is more to these stories, under the ebullience of their poetic lines, as there is to all myths. The gods' willingness to start fights with monsters was only a way of showing the constant struggles taking place within the mind and body, between the mind and body.

And all those legends of ghosts and *Draugrs* were simply mining another kind of struggle. People perhaps wanted to know that the dead were unhappy without them, that for a while, a ghost could give them a reason to go insane,

to feel that their body was being governed and invaded by a force out of their hands. People wanted to know that if they did the wrong thing, if they buried rather than burned, their bodies would hold and grasp onto those breaths from the grave, those promises that in punishment, their flesh could be mauled, shredded, made different, overtaken.

For if fire cleanses, washes the mind in the stench and sight of a loved one being reduced to ash on saltwater for eternity, a *Draugr* is something filthier, more desperate. Grief and loss are nothing more than a sharp and aching need to be laid open, torn apart, possessed, bloody and exposed. And if crying, donning black, and singing a Lutheran hymn won't help a family grieve, then conjuring a *Draugr* and haunting my own self will do.